

‘RIP’ping Karnataka’s forests!

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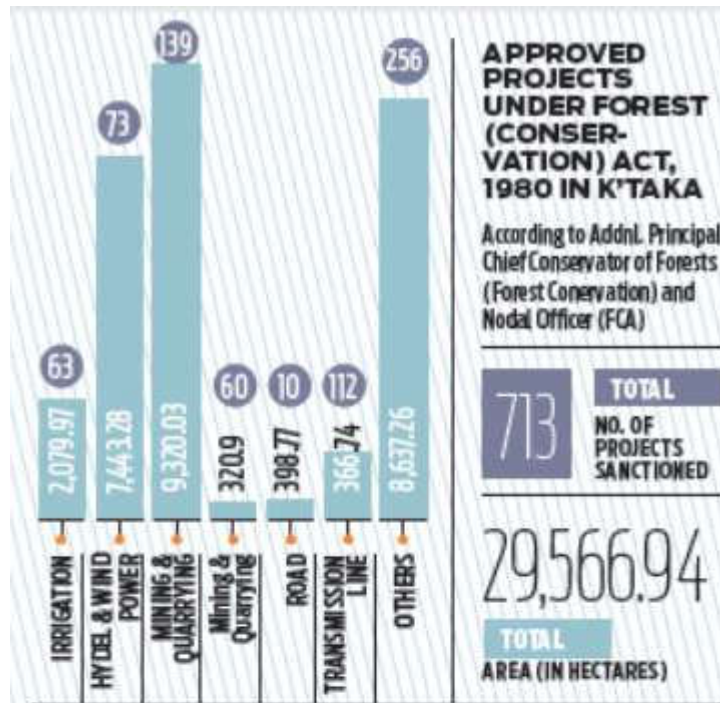
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BENGALURU: Karnataka — which boasts of having the largest elephant count (6,049) and second highest number of tigers (524) in the country — is expected to face acute forest degradation in the coming years. Multiple projects have been lined up cutting across wildlife areas of the state, requiring urgent intervention of agencies to set things right.

Experts state that forest degradation, apart from causing disastrous ecological imbalances and changes in weather patterns as seen in the recent heavy rains and floods in parts of north and coastal Karnataka, will also cause irreparable damage through a rapid increase in cases of human-wildlife conflicts.

Forest department officials admit that Shivamogga at present faces the largest threat of degradation and loss of primary forest patches for the projects pending on the state government tables for clearance.



APPROVED PROJECTS UNDER FOREST (CONSERVATION) ACT, 1980 IN K'TAKA

According to Addnl. Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Forest Conservation) and Nodal Officer (FCA)

713 TOTAL NO. OF PROJECTS SANCTIONED

29,566.94 TOTAL AREA (IN HECTARES)

Forest cover as per K'taka State Remote Sensing Applications Centre report, 2006 (in sq km)

DISTRICT	EVERGREEN	SEMI EVERGREEN	MOIST DECIDUOUS	TOTAL
Belagavi	22,895.01	0	0	22,895.01
Uttara Kannada	1,98,516.10	5,665.92	0.12	2,04,182.14
Shivamogga	29,779.39	18,579.06	0	47,758.45
Udupi	14,490.44	7,925.69	195.19	22,611.32
Chikkamagaluru	8,447.40	265.08	1,221.66	10,034.14
Hassan	2,698.40	180.24	4.14	2,882.78
D.Kannada	9,247.88	1,098.98	0	10,346.86
Kodagu	30,843.65	0	119.44	30,963.09
Mysuru	0	0	0.13	0.13
TOTAL	3,16,318.27	33,814.97	1,540.68	3,51,673.92

Forest cover of Karnataka published by Forest Survey of India, Dehradun

YEAR OF REPORT	VERY DENSE FOREST	MEDIUM DENSE FOREST	OPEN FOREST	TOTAL	CHANGE
2015 (2013-14)	1,783	20,177	14,489	36,449	+317
2017 (2015-16)	4,502	20,444	12,604	37,550	+1,101



The causative factors for degradation of natural forests include logging, encroachments, livestock grazing, collection of forest produce, unscientific habitat manipulation, including widening of view lines, removal of dead trees, bamboo and creation of water holes at inappropriate locations

— Praveen Bhargav, Trustee, Wildlife First

Topping the list are Sharavathi Hydel Project and the road widening between Shimmogga and Teertahalli. Another major road widening proposal between Belagavi to Goa will also permanently damage and degrade the forests of Western Ghats. The railway line doubling between Goa and Karnataka, which has been recently approved by the Central government authorities is also all set to gobble up large number of trees in the pristine forest area of Kali Tiger Reserve. Also, the proposal to lift the protection tag on Kappatagudda Reserve Forest and open it for gold mining for industries and politicians is being foreseen as an impending disaster.

CONSTANT DEGRADATION

According to Karnataka forest department records, before the Karnataka Forest Clearance Act came into effect, the state had already lost two lakh hectares of forest land for developmental works, which has never been restored. Then up to 2018, 29,429.66 hectares of forest land was lost to various developmental and infrastructure works. Later, up to March 2019, another 137.2830 hectares of forest land was lost.

Union Environment Minister, Prakash Javadekar, recently admitted that 18.99 lakh hectares in India have been encroached. Also the Karnataka government admitted that till 2015, 2,04,442 acres of forest have been encroached in about 1,10,626 cases. And between 2016 and 2018, Karnataka lost about 3,000 hectares in each of the years, totalling about 10,000 hectares in three years, according to the Forest Survey of India (FSI) report.

Prof TV Ramachandra, from Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), has questioned what sort of development and healthy atmosphere can be attained without proper tree cover, which has reduced to 23% now from 63% in 1970s. This is against the National Forest Policy target of 33%. He asserted that Western Ghats is just 55 percent of the total landscape, of which 45% is ecologically sensitive which is also not being protected.

MAN-MADE causes

“There is no natural degradation of forests. It is anthropogenic (man-made) and due to development. And this includes forest fires. Politicians are pushing for people to come out of forests. Timber mafia is another major factor for the degradation of forests. There are reports showing that many politicians who are now facing inquiries have over 600 acres of land in the sacred forest patches of Karnataka. This is irreparable degradation of forest cover,” Ramachandra said.

Studies have already proved that forest degradation leads to improper carbon sequestration and has been proved that this affects the rainfall pattern leading to flooding, which recently happened. Now projects like Sharavathi Hydel Project, drinking water project in Linganamakki, water project in UM Kaval, the Netravathi and Yettinaholle projects will not just damage forest, but also alter land use in surrounding areas, leading to further degradation, he said.

Praveen Bhargav, Trustee, Wildlife First, said: “The causative factors for degradation of natural forests include logging, encroachments, livestock grazing, collection of forest produce, unscientific habitat manipulation, including widening of view lines, removal of dead trees, bamboo and creation of water holes at inappropriate locations.”

He pointed out that another major factor is forest fires. FSI report documents that there have been 1,402 incidents of forest fire in Karnataka between 2008 and 2011. Apart from addressing

these causes, the forest policy must usher in a fundamental change of identifying areas where forests stand degraded but contain root stock and those which have been completely mined, ploughed etc. In case of degraded forests with root stock, the policy prescriptions of natural recovery based on strict protection only must apply.

“This is extremely important to ensure that we do not create monoculture plantations with exotic trees in such degraded forests or even in natural grasslands as is being done now. However, there is a very genuine and serious worry that release of Rs 55,000 crore fund under Compensatory Afforestation fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) Act will, in fact, lead to plantations, a ‘lucrative’ activity as opposed to natural recovery”, said Bhargava.

IGNORING THE EASTERN GHATS

Interestingly, while the state forest department is talking of protection of Western Ghats, the department and the government have completely ignored the dry planes and Eastern Ghats, where large cases of encroachment have altered the natural landscape leading to irreparable degradation.

Samad Kottur, wildlife expert from Hospet, said in the dry plains of Eastern Ghats and grasslands, the major problem is that of encroachment followed by industrialisation, mining and quarrying.

“There should be a law wherein officers are booked if encroachment happens in their time like in Sandur, where encroachment is rampant,” he said, adding that there is also a need for a resurvey of areas to ascertain how much is with which department and how much is lost.

For example in Koppal, while on paper, forest land (under Forest Department) is around 5%, in reality it is more, as most of it is under revenue department’s jurisdiction where healthy population of sloth bears, leopards, pangolin and other species are found. “It is thus important for the forest department to declare these patches under Section Four of the Wildlife Protection Act as deemed forests, where some protection measures can be ensured,” said Kottur.

Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Punati Sridhar told The New Indian Express that the department said while some parts of the forest have naturally degraded over the years, in many parts it is because of developmental works.

He said the department was working on assessing the forest cover and protecting it. He said over the years, the department had tightened the process of giving land for developmental works to ensure there is no more loss.

To ascertain the damage, types of forests and changes in types of forests, state forest department has now started the exercise survey of forests of Karnataka using geo-satellite maps. The survey is being done with the help of Karnataka State Remote Sensing Agency. They are using the base line maps of 2005 for the survey which started four months back. The help of Sirsi and Ponnampet government college students is also being taken.